



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

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### Life is Worth Giving

JOHN MCCORMACK: The Tenor Who Loved God and Music

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

He was born on the banks of the River Shannon in Athlone, Ireland, (ON JULY 14, 1884) but tenor John McCormack fell in love with God and music at an early age. And this love affair lasted for a lifetime. Indeed, his earliest experiences of both began as a choir-boy at St. Mary's Church in Athlone where a bust of McCormack memorializes the beginning of his great career.

Sharing in his delight of the God-given talent was tenor Enrico Caruso who was a legend in his own time. The story is told of a chance meeting one morning between the two great tenors.

"Good morning, Enrico," quipped McCormack in fluent Italian. "How is the world's greatest tenor this morning?"

Caruso gallantly countered, "Giovanni, since when have you become a basso?"

On Sept. 16, 1945, over 50 years ago, death silenced forever the great voice that had thrilled audiences in many parts of the world for decades. In his lifetime, John McCormack had received many honors, but always insisted that the greatest of these came simply from the response of ordinary people who flocked to his concerts of classical and folk music in which he shared his God-given talent for singing.

Fr. Kevin/ JOHN MCCORMACK/ 2

After winning several music prizes in Ireland, for both religious and secular songs, McCormack made his first trip to the U.S. at the age of 19. He sang with a choir group which performed at the Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exposition in St. Louis, Mo. The year was 1904, and it was the beginning of a singing career that would last no less than four decades.

#### A Career Turning Point

But according to McCormack himself, the real turning point of his career came shortly later when he listened to Enrico Caruso singing opera at London's Covent Garden.

"It was the best lesson up to that moment I had ever received, and a stimulus which cannot be described," he remembered years later. "The sound of Caruso's voice that night <sup>i</sup> lingered in my ears for months."

Not long afterwards, McCormack decided rightly that Italy would be the best place to study for an opera career. His teacher was the noted Vincenzo Sabatini who is credited with bringing the tenor to virtual greatness in only six months.

However, a small problem arose from John McCormack's very distinctively Irish name, before his operatic debut in "L'Amico Fritz" by Mascagni. The audience of Savona, Italy knew little of Irish opera singers, so McCormack translated his first name to the Italian "Giovanni" and used "Foli" for a surname, borrowed from his fiancée's family name of Foley.

But it was McCormack's God-given voice, not his name change, that won the audience that evening.

Fr. Kevin/ JOHN MCCORMACK/ 3

Debut in London

The following year, on Oct. 15, 1907, at the tender age of just 23, McCormack made his debut in Pietro Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" at the British Royal Opera in London's Covent Garden as their leading tenor. He was the youngest tenor to appear there, and follow<sup>(ed)</sup> his initial success with stellar performances in Verdi's "Rigoletto" and Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

No Irish Need Apply

But McCormack still ~~longed~~ longed for success in America. When he attempted to sing opera in New York, Oscar Hammerstein, father of the Broadway lyricist and then director of the Manhattan Opera House, initially refused.

"An Irish tenor in opera? I don't think so," was his terse comment.

Fortunately for McCormack and American opera audiences, Hammerstein changed his mind and booked the tenor and his great voice to sing in Verdi's "La Traviata" for his 1909 New York debut. McCormack's immediate success fostered a great American career for the talented singer. And he not only became an American citizen in 1916, but sang for Liberty Bond rallies to aid the Allies in World War I.

But after 1923, McCormack began to focus greatly on concert recitals due to a serious throat infection the previous year. To ease the strain on his voice, he began to sing opera arias, ballads and German lieder, in addition to his native Irish songs, for more than appreciative audiences in many parts of the world. He thus became one<sup>(of)</sup> the first tenor super-stars!

Fr. Kevin/ JOHN MCCORMACK/ 4

He gave as many as four recitals in a week at Boston's famed Symphony Hall. Other places he filled to capacity were New York's Carnegie Hall and the old Hippodrome where concerts were sold out months in advance.

#### Chicago Audiences

It was in Chicago, however, that McCormack found some of his most appreciate audiences. He gave at least four concerts each year at the Auditorium Theatre in downtown Chicago. He marvelled at the acoustical perfection which added greatly to his voice. He felt quite at home in Chicago where people of all classes and ethnic origins gave him a hearty welcome and rejoiced in his stellar performances.

McCormack also early on endeared himself to many people by his great work for various charities. In 1921, his charity work included a concert for Irish Famine Relief which raised some \$78,000. This was a great sum of money for those times. He also sang benefit concerts for St. Vincent's Infant Hospital here, and also for the Little Company of Mary Hospital in nearby Evergreen Park.

Chicago critics also sang the tenor's praises. Following a 1933 recital at Orchestra Hall, Chicago "Tribune" critic Edward Moore wrote, "Someday in the future, when the present century has become a matter of history, John McCormack will without doubt be cited as an Irish legend."

By the end of the 1920s, McCormack was considered the highest-paid entertainer in the U.S., with an estimated income of \$100,000 annually.

Fr. Kevin/ JOHN MCCARMACK/ 5

A Motion Picture Singer

In 1929 McCormack would switch to the new "talkie" films to star in "Song o' My Heart" which brought him back to Chicago via the new movie houses. With him in the film was the then 18-year-old Maureen O'Sullivan in her own film debut.

In 1931, he returned to Chicago for a recital at the Civic Opera House. Critic Edward Moore summed up not only McCormack's performance but his life. "He is a great artist in the aristocratic, sustained phrases of ancient music, a great artist also in modern mood painting, in the humor and pathos of the songs of Ireland.... He is always not only a singer of extraordinary ability and charm, but the great story-teller of the world."

McCormack officially retired in 1938 but showed his great gratitude to America during World War II by returning to the concert stage where he raised nearly \$1 million for the American Red Cross, the Knights of Columbus, and other charities.

Return to Ireland and God

Shortly after World War II, John McCormack returned to his birthplace where he died near Dublin on Sept. 16, ~~1945~~ 1945, but left the memory of his God-gifted voice to audiences in many parts of the world. To his final day, he was filled with gratitude to God for giving him such a great singing voice which he used for so much good for so many years.